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Of Mice and Men by John Steinbeck

Discussion questions used at SPL August -- 2010

1. This book is 70 years old -- How well has it held up? Had you read this before? Seen the movie? If not, were you able to predict what would happen?
2. What did you think of Steinbeck's writing style? How would you describe it? Was it readable to you? Too much dialect? Does that help with the flavor of the story – does it add a type of personality?
3. What do you think some of the themes of this book were? Friendship. Isolation. Poverty. Dreams. Alienation. The lot of workers. The need for a home. Oppression. Impairment – both physical and psychological. Do they holdup yet?
4. What are some of the conflicts in the book?
5. What did you think of the friendship between George and Lenny? Why did George take care of Lenny the way he did? How would you describe Lennie? George? Was Lennie a dangerous character? What did the others think of their friendship? Was it one they envied?
6. Were Lenny & George's dream of owning their own farm really feasible? Why was it important that they have that dream? Can people survive without them? Why did Candy latch on to their dream? Do you think they would have let Crook in on the plan if he had asked? Why did the story of the farm keep getting repeated?
7. How were women portrayed in this book? We met Curley's wife, read about Lenny's mother, the girl in the soft red dress, read about the prostitutes. Were women out of place in this world of men?
8. Why did Curly's wife act the way she did? What do you think she was trying to do by hanging around the men in the bunkhouse? Why didn't she have a name?
9. Did you have sympathy for the characters? Which ones evoked the most? The least?
10. Which characters stayed the same and which changed over the course of this story? Why didn't Lenny change? How did George change?

11. There was lots of foreshadowing in this book -- did that help or hinder the story for you?
12. Can you justify what George did to Lennie at the end of the book? How would you compare the shooting of Lennie with the shooting of Candy's dog?
13. *Of Mice and Men* has a controversial history. It has been repeatedly banned by school boards. Why might this book have been banned? Is such an action justified?
14. What do you think the title represents? Did you know it was based on a line from a poem by Robert Burns . . . *To A Mouse*? (printed out at the end of this kit)

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General Discussion Questions

- For the person who chose the book – What made you want to read it? What made you pick it for the book club? Did it live up to your expectations?
- How is the book structured? First person? Third person? Flashbacks? Narrative devices? Do you think the author did a good job with it?
- How would you describe the author's writing style? Concise? Flowery? How is language used in this book? Read aloud a passage that really struck you. How does that passage relate to the book as a whole?
- How effective is the author's use of plot twists? Were you able to predict certain things before they happened? Did the author keep you guessing until the end?
- Did the book hold your interest?
- How important is the setting to the story? Did you feel like you were somewhere else? Did the time setting make a difference in the story? Did the author provide enough background information for you to understand the setting and time placement?
- Which is stronger in the book – the characters or the plots?
- Would you recommend this book to someone else? Why? And to whom?

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Of Mice and Men

Author biography courtesy of the National Steinbeck Center.

<http://www.steinbeck.org/>

John Ernst Steinbeck, Nobel and Pulitzer Prize winner, was born in Salinas, California February 27, 1902. His father, John Steinbeck, served as Monterey County Treasurer for many years. His mother, Olive Hamilton, was a former schoolteacher who developed in him a love of literature. Young Steinbeck came to know the Salinas Valley well, working as a hired hand on nearby ranches in Monterey County. In 1919, he graduated from Salinas High School as president of his class and entered Stanford University majoring in English. Stanford did not claim his undivided attention. During this time he attended only sporadically while working at a variety of jobs including on with the Big Sur highway project, and one at Spreckels Sugar Company near Salinas.

Steinbeck left Stanford permanently in 1925 to pursue a career in writing in New York City. He was unsuccessful and returned, disappointed, to California the following year. Though his first novel, *Cup of Gold*, was published in 1929, it attracted little literary attention. Two subsequent novels, *The Pastures of Heaven* and *To A God Unknown*, met the same fate.

After moving to the Monterey Peninsula in 1930, Steinbeck and his new wife, Carol Henning, made their home in Pacific Grove. Here, not far from famed Cannery Row, heart of the California sardine industry, Steinbeck found material he would later use for two more works, *Tortilla Flat* and *Cannery Row*. With *Tortilla Flat* (1935), Steinbeck's career took a decidedly positive turn, receiving the California Commonwealth Club's Gold Medal. He felt encouraged to continue writing, relying on extensive research and personal observation of the human drama for his stories. In 1937, *Of Mice and Men* was published. Two years later, the novel was produced on Broadway and made into a movie. In 1940, Steinbeck won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction for *Grapes of Wrath*, bringing to public attention the plight of dispossessed farmers. After Steinbeck and Henning divorced in 1942, he married Gwyndolyn Conger. The couple moved to New York City and had two sons, Thomas and two years later, John. During the war years, Steinbeck served as a war correspondent for the *New York Herald Tribune*. Some of his dispatches reappeared in *Once There Was A War*. In 1945, Steinbeck published *Cannery Row* and continued to write prolifically, producing plays, short stories and film scripts. In 1950, he married Elaine Anderson Scott and they remained together until his death.

Steinbeck received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962 "...for his realistic as well as imaginative writings, distinguished by a sympathetic humor and keen social perception.." In his acceptance speech, Steinbeck summarized what he sought to achieve through his works:

"...Literature is as old as speech. It grew out of human need for it and it has not changed except to become more needed. The skalds, the bards, the writers are not separate and exclusive. From the beginning, their functions, their duties, their responsibilities have been decreed by our species...Further more, the writer is delegated to declare and to celebrate man's proven capacity of greatness of heart and spirit—gallantry in defeat, for courage, compassion and love. In the endless war against weakness and despair, these are the bright rally flags of hope and emulation. I hold that a writer who does not passionately believe in the perfectibility of man has no dedication nor any membership in literature..."

Steinbeck remained a private person, shunning publicity and moving frequently in his search for privacy. He died on December 20, 1968 in New York City, where he and his family made a home. But his final resting place was the valley he had written about with such passion. At his request, his ashes were interred in the Garden of Memories cemetery in Salinas. He is survived by his son, Thomas.

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Of Mice and Men

To A Mouse - Burns' Original Poem

Wee, sleekit, cowrin, tim'rous beastie,
O, what a panic's in thy breastie!
Thou need na start awa sae hasty
Wi bickering brattle!
I wad be laith to rin an' chase thee,
Wi' murdering pattle.

I'm truly sorry man's dominion
Has broken Nature's social union,
An' justifies that ill opinion
Which makes thee startle
At me, thy poor, earth born companion
An' fellow mortal!

I doubt na, whyles, but thou may thieve;
What then? poor beastie, thou maun live!
A daimen icker in a thrave
'S a sma' request;
I'll get a blessin wi' the lave,
An' never miss't.

Thy wee-bit housie, too, in ruin!
It's silly wa's the win's are strewin!
An' naething, now, to big a new ane,
O' foggage green!
An' bleak December's win's ensuin,
Baith snell an' keen!

Thou saw the fields laid bare an' waste,
An' weary winter comin fast,
An' cozie here, beneath the blast,
Thou thought to dwell,
Till crash! the cruel coulter past
Out thro' thy cell.

That wee bit heap o' leaves an' stibble,
Has cost thee monie a weary nibble!
Now thou's turned out, for a' thy trouble,
But house or hald,
To thole the winter's sleety dribble,
An' cranreuch cauld.

But Mousie, thou art no thy lane,
In proving foresight may be vain:
The best laid schemes o' mice an' men
Gang aft agley,
An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain,
For promis'd joy!

Still thou are blest, compared wi' me!
The present only toucheth thee:
But och! I backward cast my e'e,
On prospects drear!
An' forward, tho' I canna see,
I guess an' fear!

The Standard English Version

Small, sleek, cowering, timorous beast,
Oh, what panic is in your breast!
You need not start away so hasty
With a hurrying scamper!
I would be loath to run and chase you,
With a murderous spade!

I'm truly sorry that Man's dominion
Has broken Nature's social union,
And justifies that ill opinion
Which makes you startled
At me, your poor, earth-born companion
And fellow mortal!

I doubt not that you may steal;
So what? Poor beast, you must live!
An odd ear from twenty four sheaves of corn
is a small request:
I'll get a blessing with the rest,
And never miss it!

Your tiny housie, too, is in ruin!
Its feeble walls the winds are strewing!
And nothing now, from which to build a new one
Of foliage green!
And bleak December's winds ensuing
Both bitter and keen!

You saw the fields laid bare and wasted
And weary Winter coming fast,
And cosy here, beneath the blast,
You thought to dwell,
Until crash! the cruel plow passed
Right through your cell.

That tiny heap of leaves and stubble (grain stalks)
Has cost you many a weary nibble!
Now you are turned out for your trouble
Without house or home (belongings),
To endure the Winter's sleety dribble,
and frosty cold.

But Mousie, you are not alone
In proving that foresight may be vain:
The best laid schemes (plans) of mice and men
Go oft astray (oft go awry)
And leave us nothing but grief and pain
Instead of promised joy!

Still, you are blessed, compared with me!
Only this moment touches you:
But oh! I backward cast my eye
On prospects turned to sadness!
And though forward I cannot see,
I guess and fear!